

One aspect of the intrinsic nature of the system of slavery for working whites was less demand for paid labor.<sup>24</sup> Further exacerbating the problems of poor whites was their inability to participate in government; few were literate and could spare the time to run for political office. In the city, the margin of wealth between the upper-class and lower-class whites was wide. Evidence of this was the contrast between simple immigrant dwellings on the outskirts of town and magnificent homes in downtown. Although the economic situation of poor whites was tenuous, those working in wage-earning jobs earned slightly more annually than did their counterparts in other areas of the state.<sup>25</sup> Of the white population in the city, only a small fraction was employed in the wage-earning jobs while others worked in trades, shipping, retail, or railroad jobs.<sup>26</sup> Their economic worries and marginalized position within government placed white workers at odds with the next class of Wilmington

occupants—free blacks—both before and after the Civil War.<sup>27</sup>

Just before the Civil War, New Hanover's free black population ranked fourteenth largest in the state with 573 of the county's 672 free blacks living in the city.<sup>28</sup> Many of the free blacks were employed as carpenters, masons, and laundresses.<sup>29</sup> Free black families flourished in the decades before the Civil War, amassing small savings, buying property, and establishing a network of connections within the white community that would transcend slavery and politics well into the twentieth century. The process by which slaves became free was a tangled web. Freedom could be purchased or granted by an owner, but both paths were fraught with danger.<sup>30</sup> Once free, men and women worked to purchase and free other family members as well as to establish a financial foothold for future generations. Men such as Alfred and Anthony Howe and Elvin Artis are examples of free blacks living and working in Wilmington who forged a life for their families in otherwise hostile environments. Another man, James D. Sampson, was freed by his white planter father. Sampson worked in Wilmington as a carpenter, and according to the 1860 census, he was the wealthiest freedman in the city, owning real estate valued at \$26,000, personal property valued at \$10,000, and 25 slaves. Sampson's children were educated in northern cities and one of his sons

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For information on the history of architects and builders in Wilmington and North Carolina, see Catherine Bishir, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina* and Bishir, *The Bellamy Mansion*.

<sup>24</sup> Joel Williamson, *Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 33-34. Williamson posits that working whites often were more helpless and dependent on the generosity of the white ruling elite than were free blacks in efforts to succeed.

<sup>25</sup> In 1860, New Hanover's wage earners of all classes earned an average of \$226.50 per year whereas the statewide average was \$189.17. Historical Census Browser. Retrieved 1/5/2005, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Of the 2,624 white males over the age of 14 working in Wilmington, in 1860 only 695 were employed in manufacturing industries. Very few women worked in manufacturing jobs throughout the period. Historical Census Browser Retrieved 1/5/2005, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center.

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<sup>27</sup> McDuffie, *Politics in Wilmington*, 32-34.

<sup>28</sup> Historical Census Browser. Retrieved 1/5/2005, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center; John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1943), 18.

<sup>29</sup> 1860 United States Census; Bellamy, *Memoirs*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> For more information on legal pathways to freedom for slaves and the difficulties in maintaining freedom, see chapter one in Franklin, *Free Negro in North Carolina*.